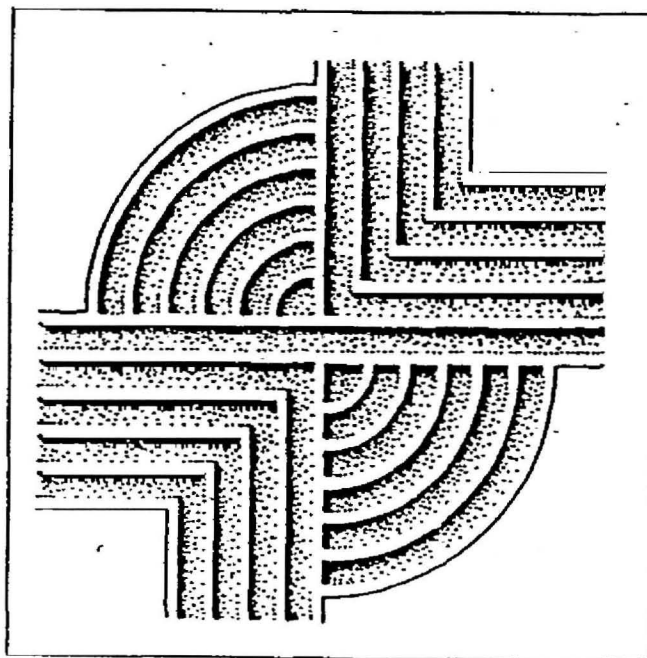


**THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF THE  
"PORT ROYAL EXPERIMENT" AT MITCHELVILLE,  
HILTON HEAD ISLAND, [BEAUFORT COUNTY],  
SOUTH CAROLINA**



**RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION 14**

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THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF THE  
"PORT ROYAL EXPERIMENT" AT MITCHELVILLE,  
HILTON HEAD ISLAND, SOUTH CAROLINA

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Paper Presented at the 1987 SHA Conference  
Savannah, Georgia

Chicora Research Contribution 14

Chicora Foundation, Inc.  
P.O. Box 8664  
Columbia, South Carolina

January 1987

In 1964 Willie Lee Rose wrote her masterful, award winning historical study entitled, Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment. In the Introduction to that study, C. Vann Woodward commented that the events on South Carolina's Sea Islands from 1861 to about 1868 offered "a rare opportunity to review the vast spectacle [of Reconstruction] in miniature and see it in its germinal phase" (Woodward in Rose 1964:xi). Rose quickly reviewed the politics, philosophy, and personalities behind Southern Secessionism, the fall of the Sea Islands (known to the Union as "Port Royal"), and then carefully recounted the course of military and civilian actions which either intentionally or unintentionally affected the black population of the area. She noted both the successes and failures of the policies directed toward the contraband, later to be known as freedmen, but suggested in the Epilogue that the revolution of the Sea Islands had gone backward with the nation largely forgetting its promises to blacks and allowing the effective nullification of the Fifteenth Amendment. More recent historians, such as McGuire (1985), have taken a more cautious (if not positive) approach, and have emphasized that the "Port Royal Experiment" provided an unprecedented opportunity for blacks to join the land owning class.

While many historians (e.g., Blassingame 1979; Fogel and

slavery, fewer have examined the relationship between slavery and emancipation. Gutman notes that,

[e]manicipation altered the societal circumstances in which southern blacks, former slaves, lived. But emancipation did not radically transform the culture of the enslaved. It is therefore possible to examine the behavior of the recently emancipated and learn about the beliefs and values they held during enslavement. From this evidence we can also learn much about the adaptive capacities of enslaved Afro-Americans (Gutman 1981:140).

The same situation is found in the archaeological literature. While there are abundant studies of slave archaeology (e.g., Ascher and Fairbanks 1971; Drucker and Anthony 1979; Fairbanks 1972, 1984 ; Orser 1984; Otto 1984; Singleton 1980; Wheaton et al. 1983), the study of postbellum blacks is in its formative stage and freedmen archaeology is characterized by the single study on Colonel's Island, Georgia by Singleton (1978, 1985). Obviously, as suggested by Gutman for historians, archaeologists could profitably study black culture both during slavery and immediately after emancipation to better understand the entire nature of Afro-American adaptive responses.

Recently Chicora Foundation was presented with the opportunity, through the auspices of The Environmental and Historical Museum of Hilton Head Island, to examine the Fish Haul site (38BU805) on the north end of Hilton Head Island, in Beaufort County, South Carolina

(Trinkley 1986). One major component of this site is a relatively intact portion of the Mitchelville community, established by the Union army for contraband blacks, and an integral, although obscure, aspect of the "Port Royal Experiment." This research is the first archaeological study and examination of the "Port Royal Experiment" and it represents a careful blend of historical and archaeological methods.

The housing of the blacks pouring onto Hilton Head after the island's fall to Union forces on November 7, 1861 was a problem from the very beginning and two approaches were eventually used by the federal authorities. The first was to establish "camps" for the blacks, such as those at Beaufort, Hilton Head, Bay Point, and Otter Island, which were built by and under the control of the Quartermaster's Department (Moore 1866:316). These camps were holding areas used by the Government until permanent locations and jobs could be found for the contrabands.

By February 3, 1862 the Quartermaster's Department had built "commodious barracks" (Moore 1866:313) described by Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper as "very comfortable and well ventilated, and hav[ing] the great architectural merit of being perfectly adapted to their purpose" (Government Buildings for Contrabands at Hilton Head 1862).

By October 1862, however, those arrangements had proven unsatisfactory and a second approach to the housing of contrabands was being developed. One newspaper article describes the situation,

[t]he present negro quarters - a long row of  
partitions into which are crowded young and old,

male and female, without respect either to quality or quantity, such has thus far been the necessity - having become a sort of Five Points, half sty, half brothel, the Major-General [O.M. Mitchel] has ordered to be removed outside [the encampments], and accordingly a piece of ground has been selected near the Drayton Plantation, about two miles off, for a negro village. The negroes are to be made to build their own houses, and it is thought to be high time they should begin to learn what freedom means by experience of self-dependence, they are to be left as much as possible to themselves (New York Times October 8, 1862, p. 1).

This is one of the earliest accounts of the founding of what came to be known as Mitchelville, in honor of its designer, General O.M. Mitchel. This "experiment in citizenship" was radically different from the other "camps." It was developed as an actual town, with neatly arranged streets, 1/4-acre lots, a town supervisor and councilmen elected by the black residents, laws regulating sanitation and community behavior, and a compulsory education law -- perhaps the first in the South. Period accounts describe individualistic structures, planting crops behind the houses, and about 1500 inhabitants by November 1865 (Coffin 1866:231-232; National Archives, RG 105, Monthly Report of Lands; Nordhoff 1863:11). There are also accurate maps of the village and a series of photographs taken in

1864 by Samuel A. Cooly.

There are few accounts in the historical documents of the daily activities at Mitchelville during the period from 1862 to 1867. We know, however, that the residents were supported primarily by wage labor (\$4 to \$12 a month, plus military rations, the cost of which might be subtracted from the wages) while the Hilton Head post was active. During this time the blacks became acquainted with a consumer economy, and stores and shops were established in Mitchelville. Public buildings, such as churches, were established.

After 1867 there is evidence that the village continued relatively unaltered and intact into the early 1870s. The economy of its inhabitants, however, turned away from the declining wage labor opportunities and returned to an agrarian base -- the inhabitants entering the sizable "black yeomanry" class. Sometime in the early 1880s Mitchelville ceased being a true village and became a small, kinship-based community. This community apparently continued into the early twentieth century, based on the nucleated settlement observed on the 1920 Hilton Head topographic map. Rose notes that Sea Island blacks became increasingly self-governing with the Baptist church being the greatest force in their lives. While the "secular law was the 'unjust' law; the church law was the 'just' law" (Rose 1964:407). The impact of Mitchelville, with its sense of community, churches, and order, may have been more far reaching than its brief history would suggest.

The historical accounts of Mitchelville are useful not only because they provide an interesting, if not altogether clear view

of the freedmen lifestyle, but also because they offer an opportunity to more clearly focus our archaeological study. Based on the historical record we were able to formulate certain archaeological expectations which served as topics for further study. At this initial stage the bulk of these topics relate to material culture, but this begins to allow a comparison to be made between antebellum slaves and postbellum freedmen lifestyles.

The archaeological study of the site has yielded a large quantity of remains (over 25,000 artifacts) which provide a detailed, yet preliminary, reconstruction of the freedmen's lifestyle. At least four structures were examined, one intensively by the excavation of 950 square feet. Over 2000 square feet in different areas of the Mitchelville village were excavated during our investigations.

Although occupation into the twentieth century was anticipated at Mitchelville, our work found almost no evidence of occupation past about 1890. This indicates that none of the structures thus far investigated was occupied into the period of the kin-based community. The information collected by this study has direct applicability to the period from about 1862 to the 1880s.

It was anticipated that a number of high status goods and arms would be found in the archaeological record, the result of blacks scavanging, looting, or bartering. We have, in fact, identified a small number of high status items, such as fancy jewelry, furniture hardware, lead crystal, silver utensils, fancy buttons, an expensive folding rule, and transfer printed ceramics.

There is evidence of the freedmen's introduction to a consumer



economy. Luxury goods, or remains of these goods, such as tin cans, calico buttons, brass lamps, tumblers, and abundant ceramics, were found. The artifact patterns from Mitchelville demonstrate that the freedmen possessed more furniture than typical for slaves or yeoman farmers, clothing items at the uppermost range of the slaves and yeoman farmers, more personal items than antebellum slaves (and possibly as many as are found at antebellum higher status sites), and many more activity items than typical of the antebellum slaves. Miller's (1980) economic scale, however, does not reveal any evidence of particular wealth based on ceramics, which are relatively plain and simple. While the freedmen had more possessions than they had as slaves, the possessions were relatively inexpensive.

Otto (1984:171-175), based on excavations at a number of antebellum slave and free black house sites, has suggested a tentative pattern of "Afro-American archaeological visibility." This pattern includes ceramics which are primarily banded, edge, or undecorated wares, and which are primarily serving bowls. The abundance of these motifs is explained by relative costs and the emphasis on bowl forms is explained by a reliance on one-pot, slow-simmer meals. The pattern also includes abundant evidence of medicine bottles which contained calomel, and blue, faceted beads.

These "artifactual characteristics" are not uniformly present at Mitchelville. Although plain pearlwares and whitewares dominate the collection, banded ceramics account for only 5% of the Mitchelville collection and transfer printed ceramics account for nearly 16% of the total. There is clearly a shift away from banded or annular

wares -- perhaps part of the freedmen's effort to distance themselves from the plantation experience (similar to their rejection of "negro cloth" and the hesitancy to plant cotton). Alternatively, this may represent an attempt to emulate plantation whites by adopting the ceramics that they were not permitted to use as slaves. Likewise, bowl forms, which account for 41 to 53% of the tableware forms at Parting Ways, Black Lucy's Garden, and Cannon's Point, account for only 34% of the tablewares at Mitchelville. If "form follows function," then this may suggest that the dietary pattern of the Mitchelville freedmen was different from that typical of slaves and antebellum free blacks. Medicine vials are uncommon at Mitchelville. While freedom may have promoted better living and working conditions, and hence less need for medicine, it seems as likely that other purchases were given a higher priority. Only the presence of blue, faceted beads clearly continues into the postbellum and may evidence elaboration to include a variety of ornamental features. Personal decoration, like ceramics, may be an effort among the freedmen to imitate the master class, or it may represent a significant African tradition.

There is archaeological evidence that another type of good, previously supplied by the plantation owner, was not as abundant in postbellum times. Tobacco pipes are observed to range as high as 9.7% of the artifact pattern on Georgia coastal slave sites, yet they account for only 0.7% of the Mitchelville artifacts. This appears to represent a "luxury" of slavery that was less significant in freedom.

We speculated, based on the historic records, that there might

be a change in the refuse disposal practices of the freedmen because of the military influence and the enactment of sanitation regulations for the village. We have identified the probable location of at least one community dump. Refuse disposal practices otherwise have not been clearly identified, since little work was conducted in either the front or rear yards associated with structures. Rear yard trash disposal has been identified from one house site, although it is not particularly dense and may actually represent a "trash pile" rather than a uniformly scattered midden deposit.

The Mitchelville structures, in most respects, closely resemble our expectations based on the historic record. They do, in fact, exhibit considerable individuality and variability in construction style and detail. They have left clear archaeological signatures, with about 54 to 63% of the recovered artifacts typically being architectural, although in no case were archaeological features present to allow the reconstruction of house size. Brick and tabby chimneys are more common than was suggested by the historical documentation.

The individual abilities, tastes, and resources of the freedmen are perhaps best exemplified by contrasting two of the more completely exposed structures. Although both exhibit about the same proportion of architectural remains, the 161-162 block structure probably contained more windows and had a brick fireplace. The 110-123 structure had fewer glassed windows and was built with a tabby wattle and daub chimney. The tabby wattle and daub construction technique dates to the eighteenth century and was not used by mid-nineteenth century antebellum planters. Yet it is clear that the

technique had been kept alive by the blacks.

The archaeological study also provides evidence of the use of Colono ware into the mid-nineteenth century, although like banded or annular wares, the slave-made Colono wares are uncommon at Mitchelville, either because the freedmen desired to distance themselves from this "slave pottery" or because European and American manufactured ceramics were increasingly within their economic reach.

It was noted during our study that nearly a quarter of the recovered utensils were handle fragments, which seemed a rather high percentage. While accidental breakage or even willful destruction by the freedmen is possible, it seems more likely that these tools were "nail-bones" or awls, used to produce the rush and palmetto baskets characteristic of low country blacks. Rosengarten notes the use of similar tools by contemporary black basketmakers (Rosengarten 1986:8). She notes that this basketmaking tradition developed from native African crafts during the antebellum period and was fostered as a means of self-support during the postbellum period (Rosengarten 1986:14-25; see also Vlach 1978). It is therefore reasonable to believe that the Mitchelville occupants were making baskets and these artifacts may provide the only remaining archaeological evidence.

The faunal remains from Mitchelville provide significant data on the foodways of the freedmen. A few species, primarily the cow and pig, contributed the greatest portion of the biomass. Fish and turtles made notable, and consistent, contributions to the diet, as suggested by the historical record. Wild mammals, while used,

appear hardly significant in the overall diet. Likewise, shellfish were collected in the late fall, but probably made a minor contribution to the diet. While pork was homegrown and slaughtered, beef was largely obtained fresh, probably as military rations. Comparing the data from Mitchelville to Reitz's (1984) Urban and Rural Patterns, we note that Mitchelville falls midway between the two, except that commensals suggest an urban environment. In other words, Mitchelville was urban, but relatively poor when compared to other urban sites and therefore somewhat more reliant on wild foods. This is, of course, documented by the historic records that talk of the near starvation by Hilton Head blacks after the military left in 1867.

These data, however, do not address the contribution of either plant foods or prepared foods purchased in bulk or in cans from local stores. The ethnobotanical record is very sparse, presumably because of food preparation and disposal practices. The historic accounts provide some information on other food sources, which emphasize grains such as rice and hominy.

The study of Mitchelville provides clear roots for the black community on Hilton Head Island, linking the abstract "Port Royal Experiment" to the land established by the federal government in 1862 as an experiment in self-government and democracy, and to the actual, physical remains of the village. In spite of "progress" and development, the experiment and its effects on the black community can be better studied nowhere else than on Hilton Head. It is appropriate to recall the words of Uncle Smart Washington, an ex-slave on St. Helena Island, who, angered by Northern speculators

among the Sea Island blacks, said,

we were born here; our parents' graves are here; we don't have any other country; this here is our home. The Northern folks have a home, don't they? What a pity that they don't love their home like we love our home, for then they would never come here to buy everything away from us (quoted in original vernacular by Gutman 1976:471).

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